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# Managing Stress in Middle School

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Middle school kids often worry about interactions with peers and their school performance.

by Patti Ghezzi



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Some kids navigate the social minefield of adolescence as if it were an obstacle course in PE. They may struggle to get over a hurdle or two, but they reach the finish line without breaking much of a sweat.

And then there's everyone else.

"It's the toughest time of life," says Kim "Tip" Frank, a South Carolina therapist and author of *Battling the Blues, Grades 3-8: The Handbook for Helping Children and Teens With Depression*. "The toughest time of my life was 7th grade."

It's a time when kids are trying to find their true identity. They want to conform and yet they're wondering if it's OK to be a little different. "They need a moral compass and confidence," says Frank.

Kids today have an even more complex "peer life" than earlier generations because of social networking, cell phones, text messaging, and other modern modes of communication, he says.

Here are some common complaints of overstressed middle schoolers and what parents can do to help.

## "I don't have any friends"

First, reassure your child that she'll get through this difficult stage, Frank says. "It's a time when you naturally feel ill at ease," he says. "There will be times when you are alone and will stand alone. Being alone is better than changing who you are to fit in with the popular crowd."

Some kids need more explicit instruction on how to make friends. Parents can help by engaging their child in a discussion about what a real friend is. Ask your child what qualities he wants in a friend. Then, you can help him identify potential friends and practice asking the kind of open-ended questions that can lead to friendship.

Remind your child that not all friendships work out. Talk to your child about how to be a good friend.

"Kids need guidance and a game plan," Frank says. "Especially for a shy child, like I was, it's important to have a game plan."

Some kids are gifted socially, and some are not. Some children will become more comfortable making friends as they get older. Some kids are satisfied with a small circle of friends, and others like to be liked by everyone.

## **“My best friend doesn’t like me any more”**

It’s common for longtime best friends to drift apart during middle school. When your child feels left behind or abandoned, it’s painful, especially if the child leaving yours behind was like a member of your family.

To help your child cope with a best friend’s sudden lack of interest, first encourage her to make it clear to her friend that she wants to keep the friendship going, Frank says. Then, remind her that if her friend chooses to end the friendship, it’s out of your child’s control. “You can only control one side of the equation,” he says.

Talk to your child about why friends move on or pull away. Maybe the friend gravitated to those who share her passion for soccer or theater. Assure your child she will make new friends. It hurts when friendships fade, but parting ways often ends up working out for the best for both children, Frank says.

## **“I made a mistake! I’m a failure!”**

Middle school teachers see a lot of perfectionism in today’s kids. These kids get upset if they miss one question on a test or if they get a B on a paper. They work so hard, they are often stressed out, moody, sleep-deprived, and overscheduled. Their drive to excel may leave little time for a social life.

“Perfectionist kids are often driven by parents who are living through their kids,” Frank says. As a parent, look inward and see whether you are pushing your child to feel like she can’t make a single mistake. Do you talk about top colleges on a daily basis? Do you make a huge deal out of a grade that isn’t an A?

Some kids are naturally driven and shouldn’t be discouraged. But others take their quest for perfection too far. In some cases, children throw themselves into academics to avoid social pressures. “You can ask your child, ‘Why do you think you have to get straight A’s?’ ” he says. “Do your best, but there’s more to life.”

Parents can offer their children opportunities to have fun. “Model hard work, relaxation, laughter, and joy,” he says. “It’s not what you say to kids, it’s how you live.”

Journalist Patti Ghezzi covered education and schools for 10 years for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. She lives in Avondale Estates, Ga., with her family, which includes husband Jason, daughter Celia, and geriatric mutt Albany.